Late Style in Beethoven

The maturity of the late works of significant artists does not resemble the kind one finds in fruit. They are, for the most part, not round, but furrowed, even ravaged. Devoid of sweetness, bitter and spiny, they do not surrender themselves to mere delectation. They lack all the harmony that the classicist aesthetic is in the habit of demanding from works of art, and they show more traces of history than of growth. The usual view explains this with the argument that they are products of an uninhibited subjectivity, or, better yet, "personality," which breaks through the envelope of form to better express itself, transforming harmony into the dissonance of its suffering, and disdaining sensual charms with the sovereign self-assurance of the spirit liberated. In this way, late works are relegated to the outer reaches of art, in the vicinity of document. In fact, studies of the very late Beethoven seldom fail to make reference to biography and fate. It is as if, confronted with the dignity of human death, the theory of art were to divest itself of its rights and abdicate in favor of reality.

Only thus can one comprehend the fact that hardly a serious objection has ever been raised to the inadequacy of this view. The latter becomes evident as soon as one fixes one's attention not on the psychological origins, but on the work itself. For it is the formal law of the work that must be discovered, at least if one disdains to cross the line that separates art from document—in which case every notebook of Beethoven's would possess greater significance than the Quartet in C-sharp Minor. The formal law of late works, however, is, at the least, incapable of being subsumed under the concept of expression. From the very late Beethoven we have extremely "expressionless," distanced works; hence, in their conclusions, people have elected to point as much to new, polyphonically objective construction as to that unrestrainedly personal element. The work's ravaged

character does not always bespeak deathly resolve and demonic humor, but is often ultimately mysterious in a way that can be sensed in pieces that have a serene, almost idyllic tone. The incorporeal spirit does not shy away from dynamic markings like *cantabile e compiacevole* or *andante amabile*. In no case can the cliché "subjective" be applied flatly to his stance. For, in general, in Beethoven's music, subjectivity—in the full sense given to it by Kant—acts not so much by breaking through form, as rather, more fundamentally, by creating it. The *Appassionata* may stand here as one example for many: admittedly more compact, formally tighter, more "harmonious" than the last quartets, it is, in equal measure, also more subjective, more autonomous, more spontaneous. Yet by comparison the last works maintain the superiority of their mystery. Wherein does it lie?

The only way to arrive at a revision of the [dominant] view of late style would be by means of the technical analysis of the works under consideration. This would have to be oriented, first of all, toward a particularity that is studiously ignored by the popularly held view: the role of conventions. This is well known in the elderly Goethe, the elderly Stifter;[1] but it can be seen just as clearly in Beethoven, as the purported representative of a radically personal stance. This makes the question more acute. For the first commandment of every "subjectivist" methodology is to brook no conventions, and to recast those that are unavoidable in terms dictated by the expressive impulse. Thus it is precisely the middle Beethoven who, through the creation of latent middle voices, through his use of rhythm, tension, and other means, always drew the traditional accompanying figures into his subjective dynamics and transformed them according to his intention—if he did not indeed develop them himself, for example in the first movement of the Fifth Symphony, out of the thematic material, and thus free them from convention on the strength of their own uniqueness. Not so the late Beethoven. Everywhere in his formal language, even where it avails itself of such a singular syntax as in the last five piano sonatas, one finds formulas and phrases of convention scattered about. The works are full of decorative trill sequences, cadences, and *fiorituras*. Often convention appears in a form that is bald, undisguised, untransformed: the first theme of the Sonata op. 110 has an unabashedly primitive accompaniment in sixteenths that would scarcely have been tolerated in the middle style; the last of the Bagatelles contains introductory and concluding measures that resemble the distracted prelude to an operatic aria—and all of this mixed in among some of the flintiest strata of the polyphonic landscape, the most restrained stirrings of solitary lyricism. No critique of Beethoven, and perhaps of late styles altogether, could be adequate that

interpreted the fragments of convention as merely psychologically motivated, the result of indifference to appearances. For ultimately, the content of art always consists in mere appearance. The relationship of the conventions to the subjectivity itself must be seen as constituting the formal law from which the content of the late works emerges—at least to the extent that the latter are ultimately taken to signify more than touching relics.

This formal law is revealed precisely in the thought of death. If, in the face of death's reality, art's rights lose their force, then the former will certainly not be able to be absorbed directly into the work in the guise of its "subject." Death is imposed only on created beings, not on works of art, and thus it has appeared in art only in a refracted mode, as allegory. The psychological interpretation misses this. By declaring mortal subjectivity to be the substance of the late work, it hopes to be able to perceive death in unbroken form in the work of art. This is the deceptive crown of its metaphysics. True, it recognizes the explosive force of subjectivity in the late work. But it looks for it in the opposite direction from that in which the work itself is striving; in the expression of subjectivity itself. But this subjectivity, as mortal, and in the name of death, disappears from the work of art into truth. The power of subjectivity in the late works of art is the irascible gesture with which it takes leave of the works themselves. It breaks their bonds, not in order to express itself, but in order, expressionless, to cast off the appearance of art. Of the works themselves it leaves only fragments behind, and communicates itself, like a cipher, only through the blank spaces from which it has disengaged itself. Touched by death, the hand of the master sets free the masses of material that he used to form; its tears and fissures, witnesses to the finite powerlessness of the I confronted with Being, are its final work. Hence the overabundance of material in *Faust II* and in the *Wanderjahre*,[2] hence the conventions that are no longer penetrated and mastered by subjectivity, but simply left to stand. With the breaking free of subjectivity, they splinter off. And as splinters, fallen away and abandoned, they themselves finally revert to expression; no longer, at this point, an expression of the solitary I, but of the mythical nature of the created being and its fall, whose steps the late works strike symbolically as if in the momentary pauses of their descent.

Thus in the very late Beethoven the conventions find expression as the naked representation of themselves. This is the function of the often-remarked-upon abbreviation of his style. It seeks not so much to free the musical language from mere phrases, as, rather, to free the mere phrase from the appearance of its subjective mastery. The mere phrase, unleashed and set free from the dynamics of the piece, speaks for itself. But only for a moment, for subjectivity, escaping, passes through it and catches it in the harsh light of its intention; hence the *crescendi* and *diminuendi*, seemingly independent of the musical construction, that are often jarring in the very late Beethoven.

No longer does he gather the landscape, deserted now, and alienated, into an image. He lights it with rays from the fire that is ignited by subjectivity, which breaks out and throws itself against the walls of the work, true to the idea of its dynamism. His late work still remains process, but not as development; rather as a catching fire between the extremes, which no longer allow for any secure middle ground or harmony of spontaneity. Between extremes in the most precise technical sense: on the one hand the monophony, the *unisono* of the significant mere phrase; on the other the polyphony, which rises above it without mediation. It is subjectivity that forcibly brings the extremes together in the moment, fills the dense polyphony with its tensions, breaks it apart with the *unisono*, and disengages itself, leaving the naked tone behind; that sets the mere phrase as a monument to what has been, marking a subjectivity turned to stone. The caesuras, the sudden discontinuities that more than anything else characterize the very late Beethoven, are those moments of breaking away; the work is silent at the instant when it is left behind, and turns its emptiness outward. Not until then does the next fragment attach itself, transfixed by the spell of subjectivity breaking loose and conjoined for better or worse with whatever preceded it; for the mystery is between them, and it cannot be invoked otherwise than in the figure they create together. This sheds light on the nonsensical fact that the very late Beethoven is called both subjective and objective. Objective is the fractured landscape, subjective the light in which—alone—it glows into life. He does not bring about their harmonious synthesis. As the power of dissociation, he tears them apart in time, in order, perhaps, to preserve them for the eternal. In the history of art late works are the catastrophes.

(1937; GS, vol. 17, pp. 13–17)
Translated by Susan H. Gillespie

NOTES BY RICHARD LEPPERT

1. Adalbert Stifter (1805–1868), prolific Austrian short-story writer and novelist best known for his bildungsroman *Der Nachsommer* [1857; "Indian Summer"] and the epic historical novel, set in the twelfth century, *Witiko* (1865–67).

His writing is classically reserved and displays sensitivity to nature and life led simply. See Eric A. Blackall, *Adalbert Stifter: A Critical Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1948).

2. Both *Faust II* and *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre* are late works. *Faust II* was published posthumously in 1832, the year of Goethe's death; Goethe began *Wanderjahre* in 1821 and completed it in 1829.

Alienated Masterpiece

The *Missa Solemnis*

Neutralization of culture—the words have the ring of a philosophical concept. They posit as a more or less general reflection that intellectual constructs have forfeited their intrinsic meanings because they have lost any possible relation to social praxis and have become that which aesthetics retrospectively claims they are—objects of pure observation, of mere contemplation. As such they ultimately lose even their own aesthetic import; their aesthetic truth content disappears along with their tension vis-à-vis reality. They become cultural goods, exhibited in a secular pantheon in which contradictions, works which would tend to destroy each other, find a deceptively peaceful realm of co-existence, e.g., Kant and Nietzsche, Bismarck and Marx, Clemens Brentano and Büchner.[1] This wax museum of great men finally admits its own disconsolateness in the innumerable ignored pictures of each museum and in the editions of the classics in miserly locked-up bookcases. But no matter how widespread the consciousness of all this has meantime become, it is still as difficult as ever to grasp this phenomenon in its entirety, at least if one ignores the fashion of biographical writing which reserves a niche for this queen and that microbe hunter. For there is no superfluous work of Rubens in which at least the cognoscenti would not admire the incarnate value and no house poet of the Cotta Firm[2] in whose work there are no non-contemporarily successful verses awaiting resurrection. Every now and then, however, it is possible to name a work in which the neutralization of culture has expressed itself most strikingly; a work, in fact, which in addition is also famous, which occupies an uncontested place in the repertoire even while it remains enigmatically incomprehensible; and one which, whatever else it may conceal, offers no justification for the admiration accorded it. No less a work than Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis* belongs in this category. To speak seriously of this

philosophical import. This section sketches how Adorno goes about his task, and what he hears in the works of the composers he focuses on.

Beethoven Adorno's aesthetic privileges extremes. Extremes exhibit clarity, the quality of standing out, determined by a relation to the conventional whose principles are, by whatever means, exceeded or violated, engaged and denaturalized. Accordingly, only by understanding the conventional will we hear the extreme as such. Two essays in this volume amply clarify Adorno's approach: the almost fragmentary "Late Style in Beethoven," barely five pages in length, which addresses in essence the entirety of Beethoven's so-named Third Period, hence a great number of works (only a couple of which he mentions even barely); and the fully fleshed out essay "Alienated Masterpiece: The *Missa Solemnis,*" which is focused in considerable detail on a single work.

"LATE STYLE IN BEETHOVEN" (1937; pp. 564–68) addresses catastrophe; Adorno likens late work to bitter, spiny fruit—whose affect, in a word, is anti-culinary. Adorno is keen to undercut accounts of late work that link it to particular forms of subjectivity associated with old age; he insists that the principle of late work is not to be found in psychology. Indeed, the dimension that interests him is not personal history but history as such: the late works of significant artists bear the ravages of history. Adorno suggests, in this regard, that Beethoven's late works are not saturated with expression (as we might expect); instead they keep their distance from us, remaining mysterious, and thereby providing an indication of the inadequacy of psychological explanation (to which, for example, Richard Strauss's "Four Last Songs" all too well, by contrast, offer themselves, in my view).

To address the riddle of late works, Adorno considers not the composer's mental-emotional state, but the works themselves. His chief interest at first glance seems off the mark, namely, the role played by conventions, in which history is congealed but also rendered invisible to the extent that conventions function as second nature.[3] In Beethoven's late-works' use of convention, Adorno finds exactly the opposite of what we might expect, not a rejection or refusal of conventions (for this would in fact be what is actually conventional in Beethoven) but a notable adherence to them. That is, it is the conventional in Beethoven's late work that (ironically, startlingly) estranges them, renders them enigmatical—and which at the same time renders inadequate psychoanalytical-subjectivist readings. "The works are full of decorative trill sequences, cadences, and *fiorituras.* Often convention appears in a form that is bald, undisguised, untransformed" (p. 565).

Adorno amplifies the point in his unfinished Beethoven monograph: "In Beethoven's late style there is altogether something like a tendency towards dissociation, decay, dissolution, but not in the sense of a process of composition which no longer holds things together: the dissociation and disintegration themselves become artistic means."[4] He further suggests that there occurs a splitting into extremes between polyphony and monody, what he terms "a dissociation of the middle," resulting in "the withering of harmony." The harmony that survives seems mask- or husk-like, "a convention keeping things upright, but largely drained of substance." Adorno remarked harmony's relative powerlessness to determine these works' forward trajectory: "Harmony suffers the same fate in late Beethoven as religion in bourgeois society: it continues to exist, but is forgotten."[5]

Adorno finds expression in the late works in their expressionlessness, and subjectivity in its apparent lack—apparently lacking to the extent that by denying a direct outpouring of subjectivity, which is what's expected, subjectivity is referenced the more profoundly. By this means, the separation of subject from (musical) object is acknowledged—the very separation that determined the flawed nature of the subject and modernity alike, the gap which the artwork serves to bridge. In other words, the late work "cast[s] off the appearance of art" (p. 566) and by that means becomes greater art still, its negativity divulging the awful truth while, as art, nonetheless positing the hope for reconciliation.

No composer ever succeeded in dominating his musical materials more than Beethoven. Indeed, for Adorno, it is this quality that marks the composer himself as the (invariably flawed) modern subject, conditioned by

3. Ibid., p. 29: "Convention signifies for Adorno the impervious, unyielding, or to use Nietzsche's term, the *immergleich* aspect of external reality, that aspect which the subject cannot alter, obscure, or efface, even through the creation of an artistic surface. . . . Even the arbitrariness with which the subject wrenches convention out of its obscurity reflects the subject's deference to the objective, since arbitrariness is not characteristic of a rational subject but is rather a facet of force, the quality that, along with collectivity, Adorno's subject associates with objective reality."

4. B, p. 189.

5. Ibid., pp. 156, 158. Subotnik, "Adorno's Diagnosis of Beethoven's Late Style," p. 32, points out that estrangement in music "requires interfering with the perception of coherence in structural and syntactical elements, something Beethoven's late style found many ways of doing."

rational powers through which he forced musical materials to do his bidding. But the late work is different. Reflective, it is produced at life's end, when "touched by death, the hand of the master sets free the masses of material that he used to form; its tears and fissures, witnesses to the finite powerlessness of the I confronted with Being, are its final work" (p. 566). The egotistical "I" recognizes in the end that the nature from which it separated itself in order to become a subject is now about to reclaim the "I" as its own in spite of everything. Death and reconciliation, to be sure, but something else, besides. The composer continues to compose, to rework the material, which is to say that he continues to assert his subjecthood but one that recognizes and valorizes a different and non-antagonistic subject-object relation. "Thus in the very late Beethoven the conventions find expression as the naked representation of themselves" (p. 566).[6]

Adorno understands musical material, in one sense "natural," to be always already historical. The composer, as it were, inherits the material: the "possibilities" immanent to the material are in place when the composer approaches it, as determined by prior use. Hence musical "nature" is fundamentally not natural; it is humanly constructed yet both part of and different from the subject. Moreover, the musical material is resistant to the composer's actions and in two ways. First, it is literally foreign to the composer, a "substance" different from the human, which the subject will shape. Second, it carries with it a certain historical contingency and inevitability; it "demands" to be shaped in some ways at the expense of others. The artwork worthy of the name, however, does not acquiesce to standardized comportment; to do so would render the effort to make art (to discern truth content) moot by definition, since standardization is a hallmark of modern domination which the standardized artwork serves merely to aestheticize, thereby perpetuating modernity's lie. But to subvert standardization requires an effort literally against the "expectations" of the material: as it were, against the force of history itself. The truth of the work is not to overcome the subject-object polarity, except, so to speak, negatively, by revealing the polarity for what it is by "working" the materials to suggest in acoustic-sensuous form how the separation of subject from object can at once be acknowledged and overcome, in acoustic-sensuous form, without losing sight of the fact that the bridging occurs in an artwork and not in society, and therefore fails, except as a hope for something better, as the representation of what might be.

6. See also B, pp. 123–61, aphorisms and notes addressing late style, and pp. 186–93, focused on the late quartets.

This is the fundamental argument that determines Adorno's account of Middle Period Beethoven, for Adorno the last historical moment in modernity when an aesthetic bridge between subject and object could legitimately be structured within works, not as a reflection of reality but as a reminder of a *socially* (and not merely aesthetically) realizable aspiration.[7] With the failure of the Enlightenment, the demand for aesthetic truth, as a repository for social truth, became all the more urgent. (After Beethoven, social crisis was mirrored in an aesthetic one.[8] Schoenberg broke the aesthetic impasse, if only temporarily, while the social crisis advanced with increasing ferocity; he recognized the impossibility, and irresponsibility, of positing even aesthetic reconciliation without at the same time preserving in art the image of what had been lost in actuality.) One of the outcomes—tricks, perhaps—of great artworks is that they take on the appearance of something organic, of a totality, their organicism the result of the domination of the materials by the artist. In this respect, even the most progressive composers' aesthetic authority contains an authoritarian element, in effect bespeaking the assertive claim, "That's how it is." Still, Adorno notes the necessity of this fatal flaw: "This is the tribute Beethoven was forced to pay to the ideological character whose spell extends even to the most sublime music ever to mean freedom by continued unfreedom."[9] Late work, like the new music Adorno admired, never relinquishes its claim to being *in*organic, and by that means the very violence necessary to wield the materials into a work is made visible, part and parcel of its truth con-

7. Eugene Lunn, *Marxism and Modernism: An Historical Study of Lukács, Brecht, Benjamin, and Adorno* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982), p. 258: "Adorno interpreted the emancipation of individual musical 'subjects' within compositions of Beethoven's second period ('subjects' whose motivic development over time generates the musical logic of the whole work), as expressions of the revolutionary universalist aspirations of the European bourgeoisie at the point at which they seemed most capable of concrete realization"; see also Martin Jay, *Adorno* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), pp. 141–44.

8. Rose Rosengard Subotnik, "The Historical Structure: Adorno's 'French' Model for the Criticism of Nineteenth-Century Music," in *Developing Variations: Style and Ideology in Western Music* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p. 207, points out that Adorno regards the division between the Second and Third Periods of Beethoven's work to signal an epistemic change of Foucauldian proportion. Adorno treats nineteenth-century music "less as a gradual decline from Beethovenian achievement than as a single unit or system, the essentials of which are established early in the century and remain more or less constant thereafter."

9. ISM, p. 210. Cf. AT, p. 245, regarding the first movement: "The entrance of the reprise in the Ninth Symphony, which is the result of the symphonic process, celebrates its original introduction. It resonates like an overwhelming 'Thus it is.'"

tent.[10] Thus the sense of Adorno's comment in *Aesthetic Theory,* "Beethoven's late works mark the revolt of one of the most powerful classicistic artists against the deception implicit in the principle of his own work."[11]

Adorno saw in Beethoven the reenactment of Hegelian philosophy. In his fragmentary Beethoven monograph, he returns to this connection repeatedly, of which the following is characteristic: "Beethoven's music is Hegelian philosophy: but at the same time it is truer than that philosophy. That is to say, it is informed by the conviction that the self-reproduction of society as a self-identical entity is not enough, indeed that it is false. Logical identity as immanent to form—as an entity at the same time fabricated and aesthetic—is both constituted and criticized by Beethoven. Its seal of truth in Beethoven's music lies in its suspension: through transcending it, form takes on its true meaning. This formal transcendence in Beethoven's music is a representation—not an expression—of hope."[12]

Beethoven's "connection" to Hegel is manifested in the relation of his music to Absolute Spirit, a utopian construct of oneness in which the subject, as a particular, progresses forward and is ultimately reconciled to the all and preserved in it—a striving progression evident, for example, in sonata form development sections.[13] Adorno, to be sure, notices both the idealism and ideology in Hegel; and he suggests that Beethoven does as well. Beethoven's music provides an *image* of the reconciliation between the subject and Absolute Spirit, the particular and the universal, without simply positing that it is so.

But not quite. Adorno subjects Beethoven to dialectical critique, if less relentlessly than he does Hegel. For starters, there is the problem of the symphonic recapitulation which returns the subject whole and intact—but profoundly self-assertive. Subjecthood is projected, but aggressively, even violently.[14] The subject's foundation in domination is underscored, so that the Hegelian reconciliation between subject and Absolute Spirit, as it were, negates itself in a falsehood papered over by the inevitability of the music's forward march—what Adorno calls Beethoven's ostentation, a "prefiguration of mass culture, which celebrates its own triumphs." Beethoven sometimes sounds contrived, as if the effects have been calculated, which Adorno likens to a "moment of ham-acting." He suggests that at times Beethoven's genius employs compositional technique to "manufacture transcendence." And in a note to himself he confides: "the manipulation of transcendence, the *coercion,* the violence. This is probably the deepest insight I have yet achieved into Beethoven. It is profoundly connected to the nature of art as appearance."[15]

Adorno's conception of late work is shaped by his sense of the performance medium of the works he has in mind—chamber music, and especially the string quartet, in contrast to orchestral music, whether symphony or concerto. He addressed the relationship of late style and genre in a chapter of *Introduction to the Sociology of Music.*[16] He suggests that chamber music's "inner character" is determined by its distribution among several musicians, and that the act of its performance seems as much dedicated to the musicians themselves as to the audience. Chamber musicians, such as quartet players with one player to a part, in effect are exposed; with no place to "hide," they can't shrink back. Each stands out, solely responsible for the "voice" assigned to his or her instrument. This fact projects the demand for and claim to expertise. It marks individual accomplishment. Yet individuality as such, the defining characteristic of the great

10. See further Shierry Weber Nicholsen, *Exact Imagination, Late Work: On Adorno's Aesthetics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997), pp. 40–43; and Robert W. Witkin, *Adorno on Music* (New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 65–69.

11. AT, p. 298. Subotnik, "Adorno's Diagnosis of Beethoven's Late Style," p. 22, however, points out that Adorno recognized the harbingers of late style in some of Beethoven's Middle Period works.

12. B, p. 14. In a note to himself in the Beethoven monograph, B, p. 8, Adorno comments: "The task of the book will be to resolve the riddle of humanity as a dialectical image."

13. Colin Sample, "Adorno on the Musical Language of Beethoven," *Musical Quarterly* 78 no. 2 (Summer 1994), p. 383: "Development in Beethoven is for Adorno precisely equivalent to the Hegelian notion of the self-reflection of absolute spirit." This essay is an extended review of the German edition of Adorno's Beethoven monograph. See also the lengthy review by Stephen Hinton, "Adorno's Unfinished *Beethoven,*" *Beethoven Forum* 5 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), pp. 139–53. Both are excellent. Hinton, p. 140, points out that Adorno began the book, never to be completed, in 1933, the year the Nazis came to power. Hinton does not regard this as coincidence, pointing out that up to this time nearly all of Adorno's work had been on living composers. He suggests that Adorno's Beethoven project is likely a response to the fact that in 1933 the National Socialists claimed Beethoven as one of their own. The connection Adorno draws between Beethoven's music and emancipation directly counters the composer's colonization by the fascists.

14. Subotnik, "Adorno's Diagnosis of Beethoven's Late Style," p. 21: "In fact, the recapitulation seems to confirm the rational irresistibility of the subject's determination to return to itself, since it nearly always seems to emerge as the logical outcome and resolution of what has preceded."

15. B, pp. 77–78 (original emphasis). Cf. p. 17: "Out of the recapitulation Beethoven produced the identity of the non-identical. Implicit in this, however, is the fact that while the recapitulation is in itself positive, the tangibly conventional, it is *also* the moment of untruth, of ideology."

16. ISM, pp. 85–103.

solo-concerto literature of the nineteenth century, is detrimental to chamber music discourse. The individual's role must be subordinated to that of the whole: each voice must be heard and must, in effect, hear its others. Adorno argued that chamber music is the sonoric embodiment of a sociality otherwise disappearing from modern society. Chamber music—and he had the string quartet in the forefront of his mind—represented for him a kind of utopian social balance between the promulgation of individuality, on the one hand, and the relation of individuality to the enactment of community, on the other.

Throughout his writing, Adorno labored to understand the sociocultural import of Western individuality in both its philosophical and practical functions—dating as far back as the Homeric Odysseus and culminating in what he would surely recognize today in human types as diverse as media stars, Wall-Street MBAs, sports tycoons (both owners and players), and celeb-status musicians of all types. Adorno saw individuality as the foundation of history, as the defining principle of the Western subject. He viewed it dialectically, as something both paradoxical and contradictory, at once liberating and enslaving. Individuality constituted the basis of social organization, yet individuality in its competitive, appetitive, ultimately solipsistic drive was ironically anti-social, anti-communal, and fundamentally self-privatizing. For Adorno chamber music, both as sound and as a social phenomenon, was a site of momentary refuge, a place of promise, imagination, and perhaps memory, where another kind of individuality might be thought, seen, and indeed heard. In chamber music he located a space for a lost sociability, where each musical voice was heard by mutual consent, and where being heard was not defined by the competitive survival of the fittest, the loudest, the most clever. In chamber music, as a principle of musical organization, Adorno heard and saw musical conversation, musical give and take, musical sharing, musical support of intertwining voices: in short, an enactment of mutual respect and friendship. In chamber music Adorno could imagine the possibility of what otherwise seemed unavailable: a society that was actually social (or sociable).

The issue wasn't defined simply by what went on among the four players; the effects he projected involved chamber music's audience as well, to the extent that listening to chamber music tends to offer less opportunity for culinary reception than, say, orchestral music with its dramatic climaxes and stunning array of sonoric effects. Adorno clearly understood that the audience for chamber music was largely privileged. It was small, typically economically and educationally elite; its audience was "comfortable." Paradoxically, the audience for chamber music constituted the embodied reminder of the profoundly unequal society that Adorno saw chamber music itself sonorically re-imagining in more democratic form. Yet he was neither romantic nor cynic, either about music or political sociology. As he put it, "Chamber music is specific to an epoch in which the private sphere, as one of leisure, has vigorously parted from the public-professional sphere."[17]

Chamber music does not eschew the competition inherent in, say, the concerto: the four string parts of the quartet do after all interrupt one another, one part struggling against the momentary hegemony of another, for example. Further, the audience sees this in the physical gestures necessary to make one instrument heard with or against or above another—the biting attack of bow against string, maybe of pizzicato, or *col legno* use of the bow, introducing a new sonority like an exclamation or an insistence against the prevailing discourse. We can *see* all this: the players do things with their bodies that have visual and aural consequences. String quartets, in other words, are not the musical equivalents of love feasts.

But neither are quartets analogous to TV's *Battle of the Network Stars* or *Survivor*—acoustic contests of the musically fittest. Quartets engender competition, and in part depend upon it, but they limit competition's seeming demand to win by the other's defeat by remaining within preordained formal boundaries of a composition that in the end fails as music unless the parts work to produce a whole. Adorno commented, "The first step in playing chamber music well is to learn not to thrust oneself forward but to step back. What makes a whole is not boastful self-assertion on the several parts—that would produce a barbarian chaos—but self-limiting reflection." Chamber music in essence "practices courtesy."[18]

By contrast, the nineteenth-century concerto commonly depends for its impact on the thrall within which the audience is held on account of the soloist's ability to claim our attention as the one and only. That is, the concerto's success is defined by the soloist in opposition to the orchestra. It is not the orchestra that thrills us, no matter how well it plays, but the soloist. Indeed, if the soloist is sufficiently commanding, the orchestra increasingly serves to underscore the soloist. The conductor's scopophilic magnetism is transferred to the soloist. The conductor, metaphor for the orchestral body itself, is undercut. If the soloist disappoints the audience

17. Ibid., p. 86.
18. Ibid., p. 87.

by performing unconvincingly or poorly, however, it's not the conductor or orchestra who "wins" the competition, because the music is of course scored so that only one "victor"—or none at all—is possible.

In chamber music, by contrast, competitiveness is circumscribed both sonorically and visually: there is no single hero upon whom to focus our eyes and ears. And this in turn demands a different response to the music, and a different reason for coming to hear the music: chamber music is radically social. We attend it not only for what it is but also for what it is not. Adorno explains this, paradoxically, as chamber music's "purposelessness." We aren't here to see and hear enacted the titanic force of individual will, but to experience a productive labor of (more or less) equals make sound without a winning voice, literally and metaphorically to make a harmony and a socio-musical polyphony. We're here to witness a dialogue, a conversation, the sonoric analogue to a shared meal, one of life's most profound of simple pleasures: a mutual nourishment. Adorno argued that chamber music doesn't surrender to the teleology of the ending, the drive for closure, the move toward the final thrill of the last climax. Instead, it sonorically and visually marks process—what he calls "pure doing." We don't invite a friend to eat with us in order to get to the dessert; it's the entire act of eating *and* the pleasure of the encounter as such that activates the happiness of sharing food. So also with chamber music.

Adorno pointed out that "Beethoven's symphonies are simpler than [his] chamber music despite their substantially more lavish apparatus."[19] Musically speaking, Adorno regarded the Ninth Symphony as backward-looking when compared to the late quartets.[20] "Musical conversation" in the Ninth Symphony—let's stick with the last movement—is really, after all, literally (a) speech, which, though beginning with some hesitancy, a bit of review, and some apparent searching, "finds" its true theme and rhetorical pace in the "Ode to Joy" which is nothing if not overwhelming, authoritative, and dangerously authoritarian for all its musical and textual claims in the name of liberal emancipation. The late quartets by contrast will have none of this; they provide no guarantees, no sonoric formulas about process leading inevitably to resolution, and final closure. And they never make speeches. Neither are they therefore philosophically abstract.

19. Ibid., p. 94.
20. B, p. 97: "The Ninth Symphony is not a late work [i.e., despite its date of composition], but a reconstruction of the *classical* Beethoven (with the exception of some parts of the last movement and, above all, of the trio of the third [*sic*, i.e., second] movement)" (original emphasis).

They are dialogic attempts to transcend the very claims of liberal individuality triumphantly shouted out in military rhythmic punctuations during the choral finale of the Ninth Symphony. Adorno called chamber music the "music of inwardness" at the same time that he saw the danger in that quality, to the extent that it provided refuge for the self-satisfaction of the pharisee, or as a locus where privileged people could falsely imagine they had escaped from an uglier external world that the music itself in fact acknowledged by its very difference from the world. As he put it: "The quality of works of art is the revenge of the false social condition, no matter what position they take in regard to it."[21]

"ALIENATED MASTERPIECE: THE MISSA SOLEMNIS" (1959; pp. 569–83) attempts a rescue of a work that Adorno acknowledged has been neutralized as canonic, as cultural goods, but which nonetheless remains "enigmatically incomprehensible" and which "offers no justification for the admiration accorded it" (p. 569).[22] Adorno seeks, as with his famous Bach essay,[23] to "break through the aura of irrelevant worship which protectively surrounds [the *Missa Solemnis*] and thereby perhaps to contribute something to an authentic aesthetic experience of it beyond the paralyzing respect of the academic sphere" (p. 570).

21. ISM, p. 95. Cf. James Brown, "The Amateur String Quartet," *Musical Times* 68 (1927), a serialized "how-to" essay intended to guide the training of teen-aged string players, most of which involves practical suggestions not relevant here. But here and there Brown anticipates Adorno, and in a treatise on performance rather than a book of academic sociology of music. At the end he identifies what characterizes the uniqueness of the string quartet as an ensemble. He botches it just a bit, for the word he chooses is "aristocratic." But Brown redeems himself, and at considerable verbal length, by getting at exactly what Adorno later better stated: "string quartet playing is perhaps the most perfect expression, in terms of music, of that precious human quality which we call courtesy"; and he goes on to link quartet playing to sociality itself. "Perhaps instead of 'music,'" he says, "I should say 'social music'; that is to say, music performed by several people together," the point of which he specifies brilliantly: "It is impossible to extricate the 'social' joy from the 'musical' joy [of string quartet playing], because they are actually the same thing" (p. 908). The social courtesy of the string quartet—the music, the making of the music—is musical doing with others. It is a simulacrum of happiness. See also Barbara Hanning, "Conversation and Musical Style in the Late Eighteenth-Century Parisian Salon," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 22 no. 3 (Summer 1989), pp. 512–28, which considers the development of style dialogue in instrumental chamber music as a mirror of salon etiquette. Works by Haydn, as well as by lesser composers, are discussed.
22. By his own account, Adorno never succeeded in penetrating the enigma of the *Missa Solemnis*, which he points out in the foreword to his essay collection *Moments musicaux*, GS, vol. 17, p. 12.
23. Adorno, "Bach Defended against His Devotees" (1951), PR, pp. 133–46.